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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how deliberation and critical reflection contribute to the quality of teachers' work. The paper defines deliberation and notes factors that could interfere with the process. The paper then examines critical reflection theory, differentiating three types of assumptions, and highlighting four "lenses" that can help the process of reflection. The paper concludes with an example of how deliberation and critical reflection are used to improve practice in a 2-year early childhood program, in which early childhood teachers meet every 2 weeks to discuss and reflect critically on their practice. (Author/HTH)

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The Inner Voice of the Teacher: The Key to Quality

Naama Zoran

Abstract

This paper discusses how deliberation and critical reflection contribute to the quality of teachers' work. The paper concludes with an example of how deliberation and critical reflection are used to improve practice in a two-year early childhood program, in which early childhood teachers meet every two weeks to discuss and reflect critically on their practice.

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"Be as you are, search for your own way. Know yourself before searching to know children . . . Above all you are a child too, and you must know and educate this child first." (Korchak, 1943)

Reflection and deliberation are two of the most important strategies involved in the teacher's planning process and that contribute to the quality of a teacher's work. Their importance stems from the fact that they reflect the inner processes—emotional and cognitive—that the teacher goes through during the curricular decision-making process. It is interesting that the most important domain that influences teachers' curricular decisions—the emotional domain—is the least acknowledged. This domain will be the focus of this paper. The theoretical framework chosen here combines Schwab's (1966) curricular theory and Brookfield's (1995) "critical reflection" theory.

Deliberation

Schwab's theory focuses on the *deliberation* concept, which is the main strategy for planning and solving curricular problems. Deliberation is a systematic and dynamic process in which there is a search for the best alternative depending on the situation. During this process, the teacher has to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative and decide which choice is the most appropriate given the situation. Deliberation is a personal process that is influenced by teacher beliefs, attitudes, history, and context. The ability to analyze any situation from various points of view will change according to the teacher's openness.

Roby (1985) states that there are factors that could interfere with the deliberation process. He calls those factors habits and says that these behaviors are displayed consciously or unconsciously during any coping situation. The habits reflect a person's preferences or avoidance behaviors. During the process of deliberation, habits can be divided into three categories according to how they interfere with the decision-making process: (1) ignorance or inappropriate reaction to a commonplace situation; (2) expectation of linear progress and resulting difficulty coping with uncertain situations; and (3) choosing a quick solution, jumping to conclusions without comprehensive thinking. The more aware the

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teacher is of these habits, the more qualitative is the decision-making process.

Critical Reflection

The theory of "critical reflection" was chosen because it emphasizes how crucial *basic assumptions* are in influencing and directing curricular planning processes. Brookfield (1995) defines assumptions as basic guidelines that help us to understand the world and act in accordance with the environments in which we live. He differentiates among three kinds of assumptions:

- *Paradigmatic assumptions*: Basic axioms that construct our world, paradigmatic assumptions are the most basic scripts we create from the messages we get from significant figures in our lives.
- *Prescriptive assumptions*: Based on and widening paradigmatic assumptions, prescriptive assumptions reflect what we think should happen in a certain situation.
- *Causal assumptions*: Based on the other two assumptions, causal assumptions deal with "If...then" issues. Included in what we think should happen in any situation is our knowledge about what will happen if we take one path or another.

The main contribution of critical reflection theory is its focus on one of the most important factors in the decision-making process—teacher awareness. In this process, teachers must distinguish between their own voices and those of authorities and decide which voice to listen to in a given situation. Brookfield (1995) suggests four lenses that could help in this process of critical reflection:

- *Teachers' autobiographies as teachers and learners*: Here we examine our assumptions from two points of view simultaneously: one through our experiences as teachers—trying to understand our choices and responses in different situations—and the other through our experiences as learners—trying to understand how those experiences influence our decisions in class.
- *The eyes of the learners*: By looking at ourselves as our students see us and examining our relationships with them, we try to figure out the meanings that learners give to our actions.
- *The eyes of other teachers*: The way that other teachers look at our practice enables us to discover dimensions that usually are hidden to us. Colleagues provide a mirror that reveals our actions to us, thereby enabling us to reframe our practice.
- *Theoretical basis*: The theoretical background we use is the basis of the critical reflection effort. The more solid and wide the theoretical base, the more options we have.

An Example

At this point, we connect the deliberation and the reflection processes. In our two-year program, we work with a group of early childhood teachers who meet once every two weeks to discuss their beliefs, assumptions, values, emotions, and knowledge about education in general—and about curriculum especially—as the core of the qualitative planning process.

Each meeting begins with an example given by one of the teachers. As the leader of the group, I do not know what will happen, and I take the discussion wherever the participants wish to go. At other times, I bring a statement and ask the participants to relate to that statement with an example of a personal experience.

One meeting began with a teacher telling a story about a child in her class who did not want to participate in "circle time." When she tried to convince the child to participate, he began arguing and even showed aggression towards her. If she did not make him join the group, she felt he was missing the knowledge she gave the rest of the class. She asked how she could make him join "circle time" without a battle.

This story was the trigger for discussion. We first tried to understand the assumptions in this case. The teacher and others began sharing their assumptions about the child, their role in general and in this case,

and their expectations. I tried to show them that their reaction to the child was influenced by these assumptions and that these assumptions prevented them from seeing *the child* and what he was trying to tell us in that situation. We elaborated on the difference between *seeing the child as a whole* and *seeing the problem* as our focus.

At this point, the teacher added a very meaningful piece of information, saying that while he sat far from the circle he was very attentive, watching them with a telescope. Through that information, I showed them that only after we began relating to the child could we open ourselves to his overall behavior and see how he participated in the circle—although in a unique way. We explored the assumptions issue, showing that the way we define "participating" influences our reaction to the child and may interfere with seeing the child himself with his needs and concerns. We connected that observation to Roby's concept of "habits," showing that there are times when we choose a quick solution (how to make him participate in our way) losing the deliberation process (using a comprehensive view in looking at the situation).

At this point, the teacher began talking about the child differently, and I chose that moment to add a theoretical basis to her view. I connected the child behavior to the process of "self-development" using concepts from Stern (1985) and Greenspan (1992). Stern (1985) focuses on the basic existential question of who the child is in two domains: "me versus others" and "me with others." We tried to understand how the child's behavior reflected his concern about his place in the class as part of the group and simultaneously his place in the class as a unique person. We then tried to think about appropriate ways to respond to the child. Through this process, the teachers experienced using the strategy of deliberation in a concrete case.

We ended the meeting with the following insight:

> The human eye (and an individual's interpretation of the world) is the most misleading organ in the human body—in the child more is hidden than is obvious, so we should search beyond the obvious whenever and wherever we can.

Through these meetings, we hope that we can help teachers begin to relate to situations in wider and deeper ways, and help them realize that their vision is like a kaleidoscope that changes and has many colors according to their ability to use that kaleidoscope in different ways.

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